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ABSTRACT

Education in rural schools is alive, working to provide quality education through different organizational configurations, and experiencing many changes as it strives to meet the needs of all rural children for a quality education. In the nurturing of rural schools, the State must assist in making it possible to adequately finance justifiable small rural schools; assure quality preparation of teachers and administrators to serve in rural areas and adequately plan for continued staff development; assist in the coordination of providing additional educational services such as special and vocational education to rural schools; provide support for curriculum development; encourage rather than mandate high performance standards; provide for dissemination of research findings and programs that work; and finally, and perhaps most important of all, recognize and accept rural education as a vitally important part of the state's educational system. In concert with all the actors on the rural scene, state departments of education must work to equalize financial burdens and compensate rural school districts for costs associated with small scale and sparsity. (BRR)

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"Musings of a Chief State School Officer on Nurturing Rural Schools"

Education in rural schools is alive, working to provide quality education through different organizational configurations, and experiencing many changes as it strives to meet the needs of all children for a quality education living in rural areas.

The song, "Castles in the Air", written by Don MacLean has these words: "How can words express the feel of sunshine in the morning in the hills away from city strife?.... I'm city-born, but love the country life." The words depict, in more and more areas, the influx of new populations into the rural countryside.... and hence into rural schools. Certainly there remains the isolated, purely agricultural territory - the expanse of wheat fields, corn fields, ranches and other business and agricultural pursuits - regions dotted with small villages and towns.

Though the great strength of community life, more than often centered around a rural school, remains but it remains to a lesser extent, the homogeneity and its great potential for wholesomeness, stability and quality education is changing.

Stuart Rosenfeld and Jonathon Sher trace what they call, "The Urbanization of Rural Schools" to the very early nineteenth century when leading educators and reformers "endeavored to save" America's rural schools by "rearranging or replacing them."[1] Other segments of American society, however, were also involved, such as, emerging industrial plants, agricultural - related processing and marketing businesses, service industries and other businesses. All of these developments were in the name of progress and a better quality of life influenced the rural schools not only in curriculum but in greater social responsibilities.

In fact, the rural schools, as the urban schools, reflected the societal changes.

As new inventions and discoveries impacted production, agricultural operations in terms of labor-saving devices, herbicides, pesticides, and irrigation, and in terms of transportation, the mode of operation in rural areas brought greater diversity and demands for different services and the need for broader educational opportunities. Rural schools did not remain untouched so that many of "the people who run country schools and teach in them say the social and educational problems they face today, after simmering on the back burners for several decades, have become critical and that it can be no longer assumed that equal opportunities are available for their children".[2]

Again, the population mobility coupled with rapid air and ground transportation has done much to change both the structure of the family and the rural community. In so many areas of our country, more than a majority of our rural youth leave the places in which they grew up to seek job opportunities. Yes, some return to the country as indicated earlier in the speech, but commute by train or auto and probably soon by vertical air machines to job sites over an even larger area. Therefore, the breadth and quality of rural and the 3rd and 4th ring of suburban youths' educational opportunities will directly affect their potential for appropriate job placement and careers. While addressing needed opportunities in rural schools, all of us long to return to rural areas in our search of an improved quality of life, away from the logistical, social, psychological and physiological offenses of urban living.

Changes that have taken place remind me of a conversation between a high school youth and a retired farmer who had moved into the small town where the youth attended high school ___ "Uncle Joe", said the youth," I'll bet you have seen a lot of changes in farming practices and in this community over the years". "Well, son, Yes I have," replied the old farmer, "and I've been agin most of them."

From this brief and sketchy background let me spend the remainder of my time addressing the nurturing of rural schools in terms of further development of them from the state standpoint. "Prediction", Kenneth Boulding said, "is necessary for decision and all decisions are about the future. Our images, however can only be derived from our images of the past, for this is all for which we have experience and records."

A question often asked is, "Will rural schools survive?" My answer, "not all of them". The rural schools that survive will be the ones which will invest their economic resources, provide the attraction for and retention of the kinds of quality teachers needed, offer the breadth as well as the depth of curriculum choices which will prepare their youth for tomorrow and the tomorrow after that.

When a Chief State School Officer talks in these terms, and especially this one from a State with 1½ million people and 1,045 school districts, reorganization rears its head and criticism with great embellishments come forth. But on the other hand it was President Harry Truman who often reminded us, "that if you can't stand the heat, you'd better get out of the kitchen!"

Factors that have brought pressures to a re-examination of consolidation and attention to rural schools generally are two. The first factor is that in the past half dozen years small rural districts have experienced rapid increases in property values, often at twice the rate of more densely settled districts.[3]

The phenonemon is as true in New York and other states as it is in Nebraska. The trouble is these increases in property values have brought no corresponding increases in rural income levels. As a consequence rural districts too often are forced to lower spending levels, narrow offerings, employ fewer teachers, particularly in specialized areas such as vocational education, special education, and as services diminish, the number of higher mathematics and science courses so desparately needed in our informational and technological society. The second factor is declining enrollment which magnifies the problem.

State Departments of Education in concert with school boards, administrators and the other actors on the rural scene - the finance industry and businessmen must work together more closely to equalize financial burdens and compensate rural school districts for costs associated with small scale and sparsity. Likewise, incentives for joint-planning, sharing of services and consolidation where feasible should be considered.

"If a state is to meet its responsibilities for the education of all children, and if local control is to be strengthened and remain meaningful, then we must develop the kinds of partnership arrangements for both planning and operations that are at once politically and popularly acceptable, financially feasible, and educationally sound."[4]

States can work in partnership arrangements by taking time to look around in an attempt to recognize and deal with those forces which are presently affecting education, and attempt to deal with them in a manner that is most efficient and beneficial to students. For instance, let me enumerate some of the forces: 1. The continuing, exponential expansion of knowledge in all disciplines. It is essential that concepts, generalizations, and understandings develop from and build upon what was previously learned, so the student can move to other more sophisticated but related material. This change in emphasis demands high quali-

fied teachers, competent in both content and techniques, if the learners are to be best served.[5] The Secretary's National Commission on Excellence in Education is looking at addressing ways in which this can be accomplished (1) since not everything can be learned that is known, choices must be made --- an examination of content; (2) no specific set of studies or disciplines can any longer claim a monopoly on defining the educated person --- time on task is needed to speak to those choices; and (3) we must teach students adaptability and learning how to learn, rather than emphasizing facts and inert knowledge.

A second force is changing social values, attitudes, and expectations.[6] Rural areas as indicated earlier are beginning to feel the influence of a more pluralistic society. Certainly strengths of rural schools do include a "desirable environment",[7] the absence of congestion, and reflect basic American and democratic values --- which include citizenship, economic independence and individual and group responsibility. However, the spreading problems of a more diverse population with its accompanying influences of drug and alcohol abuse, teenage pregnancy, single parent families have served to shatter some of our beliefs about the tranquility of the rural setting. Our "values, attitudes and institutions have been put to test to a degree and in ways which were inconceivable in generations past. These changes create new demands upon all our institutions, and we must join together to adequately deal with them.[8]

A third force is a new world of work. Science and technology have combined to provide new job opportunities. On the farm and off-the-farm jobs have been significantly affected. "The national welfare is dependent upon an educational structure which will meet the basic occupational needs of all citizens. We are a knowledge - dependent society and one based primarily on services. Moreover, an education is no longer a vaccination making one forever immune to ignorance or further education. Jobs and techniques become obsolete, compelling use to con-

tinue learning throughout our lifetimes". Partnerships must be formed to assure rural youth access to vocational and occupational skills in order to compete in the job market. A fourth factor relates to "new instructional technology and educational methods". Changes in learning theory with emphasis upon the individual, accompanied by a variety of new electrical and mechanical aids, including television and computers, are having a marked impact upon past notions of student-teacher relationships and the role of each in the teaching and learning process. Many rural youth have access to new learning devices in their homes. The future in this area is mind-boggling. While the machines are becoming more and more sophisticated and capable of exponential expansion, the materials or software to use with them need as great a care in development as have out textbooks and library materials.

To be sure, there are additional forces affecting education in rural areas as we look to the future.

Henry Ford said, "Nobody can really guarantee the future. The best we can do is size up the chances, calculate the risks involved, estimate our ability to deal with them, and then make our plans with confidence."

In the nurturing of rural schools, the State must assist in making it possible to adequately finance justifiable small rural schools; assure quality preparation of teachers and administrators to serve in rural areas and adequately plan for continued staff development; assist in the coordination of providing additional educational services such as special and vocational education to rural schools; provide support for curriculum development; encourage rather than mandate high performance standards; make provisions for dissemination of research findings and programs that work; and finally and perhaps most important of all, recognize and accept rural education as a vitally important part of the state's educational system.

An old gardner while laying a stone wall in a country estate was asked by the owner why he used so many small stones along with the large ones. "It's like this", he said, "these stones are like men. Many small men like me are needed to keep the big ones in place. If I leave small stones out, the big ones will not stay in place and the wall will fall."

Is it not so with rural schools, if they are left out of our planning for the pursuit of excellence in education the educational system as a whole will fail.

George Santayana, the great philospher, whose work, The Life of Reason, was first published in 1905 and 1906, was making revisions for a new edition a few months before his death in 1952. Asked whether his opinions had changed much from those he expressed almost 50 years before, he replied gently, "No I feel I have much the same things to say -- but I want to say them in a different tone of voice."

What may be new, then, is a sense of urgency, the conviction great numbers of rural educators and lay people in the field, at state levels, and in the nation's capitol, that we must become more action-oriented in our planning and do those things which need to be done to ensure excellence in education for rural America.

"We" can do it.

FOOTNOTES

1. Rosenfeld, Stuart and Sher, Jonathon, "The Urbanization of Rural Schools, p.11.

2. "Rural Schools Fight Back", Inside Education, Winter, 1982, New York Department of Education, p.10.

3. Ibid, p.13.

4. Nyquist, Ewald B, National Conference on Rural/ Regional Education, October 24, 1976.

5. Ibid.

6. Ibid.

7. "Regional Schools Fight Back", p.14.

8. Nyquist